

UPLAND GAME BIRD HUNTING OUTLOOK

Upland game bird hunting in Montana may be a mixed bag this year. Most game bird hunting begins Sept. 1. Pheasant season opens Oct. 11.

"The eastern plains experienced a mild winter, while in the mountains we had a heavy snow pack. Both are good conditions for game bird survival," said Rick Northrup, FWP game bird coordinator.

Then came the end of May and a two to three week span of cool, moist weather just at the peak hatch for many upland game birds.

"Moisture is usually a good thing for grouse, producing good hiding cover and food, but heavy snow, or cold with precipitation during the peak hatch period can be a problem for young chicks," Northrup said.

Most nesting habitats for mountain grouse were blanketed with a foot or more of snow and cold conditions during the second week of June. According to Northrup, this likely affected the early part of the hatching period for ruffed and dusky (mountain grouse) and may have caused many hens to abandon nests.

Spruce grouse generally hatch later and may not have experienced the impact. Mountain grouse are expected to be at similar levels or down from last year as a result.

Substantial spring moisture, in combination with persistent cold temperatures, also may have impacted prairie grouse, either resulting in nest abandonment or poor chick survival.

Parts of central and southeast Montana received almost a year's worth of moisture during May and early June. The fringes of these areas, such as the eastern and northern tier of counties, may represent the best areas for grouse production.

In terms of counts, sage grouse numbers were down from last year. Spring counts on leks revealed a decline in breeding birds, possibly a result of West Nile virus at work late last summer.

Sharp-tailed grouse counts were similar or better than last year. Field observations however have reported many small and young broods where the heaviest May and June moisture hit, suggesting some renesting attempts.

Gray partridge nest later and hatch during the latter half of June, which may have helped them skirt the wet weather. FWP anticipates partridge numbers will be similar to or slightly better than last year. Pheasant numbers in general are looking good but more accurate information will be forthcoming as grain harvest gets underway.

Reports on turkey populations are generally good statewide with average and above average abundance expected.

Good grass growth in most parts of the state will again provide effective hiding cover for game birds and good hunting conditions.

Upland bird seasons run through Jan. 1—with the exception of sage grouse season, which closes Nov. 1, and mountain grouse season, which closes Dec. 15.

2008 UPLAND GAME BIRD OUTLOOK CHART							
	Region 1	Region 2	Region 3	Region 4	Region 5	Region 6	Region 7
Turkey	5-	7+	3=	5=	5 -	6=	8=
Sage Grouse	NA	NA	4=	5=	4-	4-	5-
Sharp-tailed Grouse	NA	NA	4-	6=	5=	9=	8=
Huns	5=	3=	4=	6=	6=	7 =	6=
Chukars					4=	NA	NA
Blue Grouse	5=	3-	4=	6=	4-	NA	NA
Ruffed Grouse	5=	3-	4=	6=	4-	NA	NA
Spruce Grouse	5=	4=	4=	6=	NA	NA	NA
Pheasants	4-	3=	5=	7=	7+	5+	8+

In the table, the numbers in the cells represent an index of abundance, using a scale of 1-10, with 10 being high and 5 being average. A plus sign represents an increase from last year, a minus sign is a decrease and an equal sign means the numbers are about the same as in 2007.

UPLAND GAME BIRD HARVEST HISTORY

Is upland game bird hunting as good today as it was 20 years ago?

For those interested in the game bird harvest in Montana last year compared with the long-term average, here are the stats:

<u>Statewide harvest by species</u>	<u>20-year average</u>	<u>2007 estimate</u>
• Pheasant	123,037	151,592
• Gray Partridge	50,037	47,260
• Sharp-tailed grouse	53,775	54,467
• Sage grouse	10,365	3,116
• Blue grouse	19,873	18,319
• Ruffed grouse	26,372	28,853
• Spruce grouse	4,995	4,421

Interestingly, pheasant harvests have generally increased since 1987 with implementation of the CRP program in Montana. The program funds perennial cover plantings in place of crops, providing an effective mix of grain and hiding cover for pheasants.